Out-in-the-Open Undercover Stories

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Reviewed by David Martin

The reviewer is a Washington-based journalist who is currently writing a book on the CIA.

A book written by a man sworn to secrecy is on the face of it a curious proposition. It is also an increasingly common phenomenon as former CIA officers write books which they first submit to the CIA for security review in honor of the oath they signed pledging them not to reveal secrets of their trade.

That is not to say that there has been any editorial censorship of these two books. Indeed, Harry Rositzke finds a lot wrong in the uses to which the CIA has been put over the years. David Phillips, whose "Night Watch: 25 Years of Peculiar Service" reads at times like a recruitment brochure ("a one-way ticket to adventure," no less), undoubtedly had more trouble with the CIA censors since he recounts in detail his role in a number of covert operations.

The CIA apparently let him get away with it because he is writing about such oft-told tales as the Bay of Pigs and the Nixon administration's campaign against Chile's Salvador Allende. No new ground is broken here. The reader will let him get away with it because Phillips can spin a good yarn. There are some genuinely entertaining sequences, such as Phillips' first undercover meeting with a female agent. Phillips had more than intelligence in mind when he "knocked on the door with what I hoped was a properly conspiratorial rap." But the Mata Hari of his dreams wears glasses "which might have been fashioned from the bottoms of Coca-Cola bottles" and metal-tipped shoes "much like the footwear used by Chilean copper miners." It is only at their final meeting that she reveals herself as an attractive woman who uses a disguise to discourage young agents from exactly what Phillips had in mind.

Phillips' accomplished story-telling is marred by some rather contrived dialogue in places where he feels compelled to educate as well as entertain. I would bet that the man from headquarters who told Phillips about the plot to overthrow the Arbenz regime in Guatamala never interrupted his briefing to explain that "CIA was created by Truman in 1947" and that this operation is covered by a clause in the law which "gave us a catch-all assignment of performing 'such other functions and duties as the National Security Council may, from time to time, direct.' "

That unlikely bit of dialogue appears in response to one of the moral qualms Phillips voices from time to time in support of his message that whatever wrong he did was in the service of his country. The moralizing is never very convincing, and what emerges is a portrait of a man who just can't say no to a good caper. Like the man says, it's a peculiar service.

Harry Rositzke has seen his share of peculiar service, having spent much of his career grappling with the KGB. He is at his best in describing the pre-satellite days of espionage, revealing, for instance that during the Stalin era the CIA parachuted agents into Russia in a desperate, and frequently fatal, attempt to gather intelligence on troop movements that would signal what everybody then thought was the impending Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Under Khrushchev, intelligence collection came easier as tourists and diplomats were allowed to travel about the country and as the development of the U-2 wrought probably the biggest single change in spy techniques. The catalogue of information the CIA began compiling—serial numbers on boxcars, the color of smoke rising from factory chimneys—makes one pity the poor Russian spies buried under the mountains of intelligence data readily available in this country. Rositzke doesn't say so, but it almost seems easier to spy on a closed society than on an open one.

As methods of collecting intelligence became more sophisticated, American intelligence began to suffer from a "glut" of information, Rositzke says. "This increasing large-scale coverage of internal political and military events in countries of no strategic importance became a feature of Washington's global coverage," he writes. It added "little to the effectiveness of foreign policy discussions."

One symptom of the glut is what Rositzke calls "coupitis," which he defines as "an unspoken requirement that the CIA predict all coups anywhere." Since predicting a coup requires being in contact with the plotters, it is little wonder the CIA has been blamed for every coup since World War II.

Rositzke has a number of other interesting points to make, but the facts he uses to elucidate them are sometimes so heavily censored the facts he uses to elucidate them are sometimes so heavily censored (at both his own and the CIA's initiative, he says) as to rob them of authenticity. Some of the deletions seem meaningless, such as refusing to divulge the name of a CIA agent in Moscow, despite the fact that the Soviets announced his arrest and execution more than 15 years ago.

But then the Russians have always known more about the CIA than we, the ones who pay the bills, do.

Book World

THE NIGHT WATCH
By David Atlee Phillips
(Atheneum. 308 pp. $9.95)

THE CIA'S SECRET OPERATIONS: Espionage, Counterespionage and Covert Action
By Harry Rositzke
(Reader's Digest Press. 284 pp. $12.95)